DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 327 888 CS 507 367

AUTHOR Bahm, Ken
TITLE Meaning as Language Use: The Case of the "Language-Linked" Value Objection.
PUB DATE Nov 90
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (76th, Chicago, IL, November 1-4, 1990).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Debate; Definitions; Epistemology; Higher Education; *Language Role; *Language Usage; *Persuasive Discourse; *Rhetorical Criticism
IDENTIFIERS Competitive Argument; Debate Strategies; *Debate Theory; Meaning Conditions; *Wittgenstein (Ludwig)

ABSTRACT

In competitive debate, a view of meaning as something that a team has a right to pre-select is inconsistent with Ludwig Wittgenstein's conception of meaning as use. The "language-linked value objection" rejects conventional value objection of identifying the negative consequences of taking a stance in the hypothetical world of the resolution. Instead, the language-linked approach focuses directly on the opponent's actual language practices. The approach mirrors Wittgenstein's theory of meaning as use. He rejected the notion of meaning as representation in favor of a focus on the function of language. What is most useful to a student of language is what function a word can serve, not a precise description of the word's phonology and grammar. Wittgenstein's perspective challenges the presumed ability to define words in isolation. The use of language is determined by rules and norms established by the overall society of language users. As such, term meaning is not a prerogative to be exercised in debate. Linking value objections to language by considering social use may lead to consideration of ideologies embedded in language forms, the ways in which language structures political thought, the "personas" created by various language styles, the cultural embeddedness of meaning, and other issues. (Twenty-four references are attached.) (SG)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED327888

Meaning as Language Use:

The Case of the 'Language-Linked' Value Objection

Ken Bahm
Department of Communication Arts
Gonzaga University
Spokane Washington, 99258

Speech Communication Association Convention
Chicago, November 1990

CS507367

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Kenneth T. Bahm
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

Meaning as Language Use:

The Case of the 'Language-Linked' Value Objection

> "When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less."
>
> "The question is," said Alice, "Whether you can make words mean so many different things."
>
> -Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass

In Wittgensteinian terms, Humpty Dumpty would not have been considered very much of a linguist. By presenting meaning as a simple choice made and imposed by the language-user, this view seriously endangers any possible concept of language as an active and consensual process.

While it is perhaps unsurprising to recognize philosophical naivety in the characters of Carroll's book, it should be more surprising to recognize Humpty Dumpty's analysis in the defining norms of contemporary academic debate. When we tell an affirmative team that they have a "right to define," we are telling them that they, as language users, can select meaning - can choose what a word will mean, neither more nor less. The legitimate question to be asked - Alice's question - is whether words can, in fact, be made to mean.

This paper focuses on the debate community's conception of meaning. I suggest that seeing meaning as something that an affirmative team, or any team, has an open right to pre-select is dramatically inconsistent with modern philosophies of language, specifically with Wittgenstein's conception of meaning as use.

It is hoped that the application of a more functional perspective on meaning will present academic debate with a much less problematic method of determining meaning.

Certainly, it is justified for the philosophy of language to intrude on the world of academic debate. Debate is an activity intimately involved in communication, not an activity separate from other communications disciplines. Goodnight (1981) and Hingstman (1983) have argued that the practice of forensics should forge a closer relationship to communication theory. A broader and more informed perspective can be gained by promoting more relationships between forensics and other communication-related theories.

Initially, I will look at the current attitudes surrounding meaning in debate, embodied in the right to define. Next I will consider one, often implicit, challenge to this right that recently has been emerging in debate rounds. Following this, I will look at Wittgenstein's philosophy of meaning as use, as it might be applied to defining in academic debate. Finally, I will consider some of the practical effects that this new perspective might have on academic debate.

Current Assumptions: The Right to Define

The doctrine granting the affirmative side a "right to define" is certainly one of the more resilient sacred cows in the theory of academic debate. The defining power of the affirmative is almost always taken for granted as a necessity of the debate process, and as something that the affirmative need not

specifically justify. As Snyder (1979) simply puts it, "The affirmative has the right to define terms in the first affirmative speech" (p. 90, emph. added). While an affirmative team often must defend their definitions, the simple power to define is most often taken for granted. The provision of a definition by the affirmative team is most often seen as a choice that the affirmative makes, rather than an argument that the affirmative advances. As Freeley (1981) explains, "it is the priviledge of the affirmative to stipulate which legitimate definitions of terms it will use" (p. 46). And, of course, this stipulation is not without consequence. According to conventional wisdom, with a successful affirmative claim of right to define, "alternative definitions are irrelevant" (Smith, 1980, p. 54).

Certainly, affirmative definitions are often contested, but they are most often contested in ways which leave the basic affirmative right to define fundamentally intact. For example, the controversy surrounding the evaluation of affirmative definitions focuses almost exclusively on whether affirmatives should be required to show that they have selected the best definition in the round, or whether they need merely select a reasonable definition (see Herbeck & Katsulas, 1987; Parson & Bart, 1987; Unger, 1981). A common assumption held by both sides in this dispute, however, is that the affirmative, within certain parameters, has the power and the right to select meaning for a term in a given round. In other words, we most often grant that defining terms is at least initially an affirmative job, and then

argue over whether the affirmative has done its job properly. Regardless of the level of social complexity surrounding a given term's use, the affirmative is given the power to select and impose a simple and concise definition in the round. Aside from the 'best definition' versus 'reasonability' conflict, this power has remained basically unquestioned in the literature.

Emergent Argument: The Language-Linked Value Objection

The assumed affirmative power to impose definition has remained unquestioned in most debate rounds as well. In recent years, however, a few rounds have witnessed the emergence of a style of argument which, implicitly at least, seems to question this grand assumption. I will refer to this form of argument as a "language-linked value objection." Unlike the conventional value objection which identifies the negative consequences of taking an action or stance in the hypothetical world created by the resolution, the language-linked value objection focuses more directly on the actual language practices of an opponent. Specifically, this could mean identifying the negative consequences of affirming a given term in the resolution.

For example, on the Fall 1985 CEDA debate topic, "Resolved: that U.S. media coverage of terrorism is detrimental," one team on the negative argued that affirmation of a resolution including the word "terrorism," is undesirable since the term is a distinctly political label most often applied to ideological opponents. The use of this emotionally charged term in the resolution, this team argued, would only serve to perpetuate a

language system that can consider the same action either "freedom-fighting" or "terrorism" depending on the ideological bent of its perpetrator.

More recently, on the Spring 1990 CEDA debate topic, "Resolved: that the trend toward increasing foreign investment in the United States is detrimental to this nation," several teams argued that the evaluative use of the term "foreign" or the phrase "to this nation" naturally appealed to xenophobia or nationalism. The resolution as phrased, these teams argued, ought to be rejected since its language creates a negative impact.

The factual validity of these arguments is not at issue here. What is at issue is that fact that these positions reveal a different style of argument. Rather than attaching a negative consequence to some hypothesized affirmative action or value stance, these negative arguments focused on the social effects of the proposition's language. Buried in these arguments is the seed of the idea that a term can mean something beyond the affirmative's simple and specific denotative definition. These arguments, with varying degrees of explicitness, asserted that language can have an observable social <u>effect</u>, as opposed to a simple representational meaning.

In short, these language-linked value objections questioned the grand assumption that a term means just what the affirmative team says it means, no more, no less. But the arguments did not question the affirmative definition in the time-honored fashion of showing it to be "unreasonable" (or "not best" as the case may

be) and offering a counter-definition. Rather, these language-linked value objections challenged the assumption by looking at "meaning" in a distinctly different way. To the affirmative, "meaning" was determined by looking at a variety of denotative dictionary or field-context defintions, and selecting one. To the negatives described above, however, "meaning" was determined by looking at the community of language-users and determining the effect that the term had in use, the role that it played in the language game.

This clash between conceptions of meaning, occuring in academic debates, is similar to a clash over conceptions of meaning which has occured in the development of the philosophy of language. The next section will outline this clash and more fully develop the concept of meaning as use.

Meaning as Use

The conception of meaning as representation has a long history to it. The idea that a word "stands for" something else is a very intuitive one. This representational view of meaning, implicit in the debater's practice of using a one or two sentence definition to "stand for" a term in the resolution, has some serious problems, however. One of the most serious problems is that representational defintion imparts a quality to language that would not exist absent the practice of defining. By substituting a very clear and concise denotative description for a word, the illusion is created that there are specific boundaries on term meaning. This illusion, as Polkinghorne

(1983) notes, can lead to a "fake precision which is not part of the vagueness of experience" (p. 262). In life, the criticism goes, meaning is not bound by a simple description of what a term can mean but is influenced by individual connotation as well as the conditions of actual use.

The early 20th century German philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, after initially seeming to embrace a representational view of meaning, later rejected it, and his influential criticism led to the development of a conception of meaning as use or function. Viewing meaning as representation, Wittgenstein said, can promote an artificial separation between the word and what the word means:

> You say: the point isn't the word, but its meaning, and you think of the meaning as a thing of the same kind as the word, though also different from the word. Here the word, there the meaning. The money and the cow you can buy with it (P.I., 120).[1]

This reification of "meaning' as an entity that "stands for" the word and is represented by it, to Wittgenstein, overshadows a more productive conception of meaning which focuses on the function of language itself. In his later writings, particularly Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein claimed that a focus --

---

[1] Citations from Wittgenstein will make use of the following abbreviations and be cited by line number (unless otherwise noted): BB=The blue and brown books, OC=On certainty, PG=Philosophical grammar, PI=Philosophical investigations.

on meaning as representation can lead to distortion and confusion by ignoring the actual uses of words (Hallett, 1967). Placing this primary emphasis on function rather than form, Wittgenstein naturally believed that much of the concern with meaning was misplaced:

> There is always the danger of wanting to find an expression's meaning by contemplating the expression itself, and the frame of mind in which one uses it, instead of always thinking of the practice (O.C. 601).

The most productive course, to Wittgenstein, was to not assume that meaning corresponds to some psychological or objective entity - not to an object outside of language or to a sensation that accompanies word use - and to instead focus on the work that a word does. To use an analogy, if one asked a chess player what the knight "meant", the most productive answer that the player could give would not be to say that it is a varnished piece of wood of a specific shape, nor that it is a crude image of a medieval soldier. The most productive answer would be to describe the move that the knight can make and its role in the game.

The analogy holds for language. What is most useful to the student of language is not a precise description of the word's phonology and grammar, nor a description of what the word can be said to stand for. Rather, what is most useful is a discussion of what use, what function, what work a word does in the language game. One need only think of the language category of profanity

to understand the difference between what a word represents and what it does. To Wittgenstein, meaning is use:

> For a large class of cases - though not for all - in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in language (P.I., 43).[1]

In looking predominantly at practice, Wittgenstein's view of meaning as use is a challange to the presumed ability to define words in isolation. While we do talk about meaning independent of a specific use, Wittgenstein says that this is possible only through imagining possible uses -- through imagining circumstances in which the word would do work. This seems true even in the context of academic debate where new resolutions, presented in isolation, are given meaning through the imaginative process of considering what arguments might be used to justify or oppose them. As Dilman (1981) explains, "if we meet such words in isolation our understanding them is in part at least our ability to fill out the "picture," to invent a context in which it is appropriate to speak them" (p. 141). Thus, even in apparent isolation, the ultimate grounding for our conception of the meaning of a term must be practice.

Wittgenstein's emphasis on function has been very influential. In The Power of Words, Stuart Chase observes that "The true meaning of a word is to be found by observing what a

---

[1] Wittgenstein's caveat in this frequently cited passage is most probably a reference to those cases in which the operational meaning of a noun is clear enough that the noun can truly be said to denote an object.

[person] does with it, not what [they] say about it (in West, 1975, p. 151).[1] This general notion of meaning as function has found its way to even the most basic levels of communications instruction. In a fundamentals text, Zimmerman, Owen, and Seibert (1986) clearly reject representational meaning in favor of a functional approach:

> It is commonly understood that words have meanings and that the proper meanings of words can be found in the dictionary. This is a serious misconception. Words do not "have" meanings any more that sharp knives "have" cut fingers (p. 13).

The reason for this widespread appeal of conceiving of meaning as use has not so much to do with 'validity' per say, as it has to do with pragmatics. There is a utility to focusing on word function which is lost when one is bogged down looking at a word's specific definition or representation. As Hallett (1967) noted, Wittgenstein was primarily interested in the "therapeutic value" (p. 164) of looking at meaning as use. A focus on actual use is productive in leading to a focus in language studies away from meaningless terms and closer to practice. A student of society is simply going to be most interested in what language <u>does</u>.

Once it is established that meaning is most productively conceived as use, the question which follows is "whose use?" Perhaps the most intuitive answer would be, "the use of the

---

[1] gender specific reference omitted.

speaker," seeming to vindicate Humpty Dumpty's view of meaning as a speaker's choice. Wittgenstein's conception of meaning as use, however, must be seen as centered on the communicative exchange. Wittgenstein saw language from the perspective of communication, saying that "the concept of language is contained in the concept of communiction" (P.G., p. 193). The simple statement that meaning is use might be taken to mean the use of the sender or the use of the receiver. While the former would be undoubtedly important to an understanding of how we use language, it is the latter which is most important to a study of communication - a word whose very prefix presumes the existence of two or more participants. It is the use of the receiver which fundamentally determines what meaning has been communicated.

To focus on the listener is not to say that the listener creates a specialized and wholly individual "private language." In Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein rejects the notion of a "private language" as convincingly as he establishes meaning as use.[1] As Sefler (1974) notes, "When Wittgenstein asserts that meaning is use, he is not completely and unreservedly acknowledging as meaningful all existing usages of the language precisely as intended by the user" (p. 171). It is not the individual user that is important to determining meaning, be that user the sender or the receiver. Rather it is the community of

---

[1] for a concise description of Wittgenstein's rejection of private language see Gallagher, 1931, p. 46.

language use, "the role this word plays in the whole life of the tribe" (BB p. 103). In short, rules are not made by the individual player, but by the community to which the game belongs. "If meaning is tied to use" Gallagher (1981) notes, "it is tied to the 'public'" (p. 46). Looking at use within a language community, then, becomes not simply a handy tool for discovering meaning, but rather the locus of meaning itself:

> If the meaning of the word is to be understood by the comportment of the community of users, then it is clear that the notion of a community of speakers is going to be a primary phenomenon in language itself. The notion of a community comes first: the ultimate source for meaning is the form of the life of the community in which a certain word arises (Gallagher, 1981, p. 46).

Even when language is used to evoke the most private of thoughts and experiences, it makes use of the rules and norms that are established by the overall society of users.

To summarize this section, the philosophy of language contributes three very relevant points. First, the meaning of a term is best conceived not as a representation of some entity, but as a function of a term at work. Second, since language is a communication phenomenon, it is the function or the effect that a term exercises on receivers which is most important. Third, it is not the individual user of language that is important, it is the whole community in which the language game is played. Returning to a consideration of defining in academic debate,

these three arguments can serve both as a critique of defining by fiat and as a pointer toward a more productive conception of meaning in debate.

Meaning as Use, and Academic Debate

The idea that a sender of a message can select meaning is threatened at its core by the conception of meaning as use. If meaning is seen as focusing on the function of a term as regards receivers within a community of language use, it is nonsense to speak of a right to define. If these propositions of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, already internalized by much of the communication-studies discipline, were applied to academic debate the change would be considerable. Term meaning would not be considered an affirmative perogative exercised in the first affirmative constructive. While the affirmative team would most likely be given the role of starting the discussion of term meaning, that discussion would focus on how a term actually functions in its community of use, not on what the affirmative team would like the term to mean in the given round. Definitions of terms would not necessarily be found by looking in dictionaries, but might be found by looking at other indicators of the role that a given term plays. Meaning would become more of an empirical question. The resolution is a sentence in english and thus comes out of a language community. The question becomes, "what is the function of these terms in this language community?" The traditional affirmative role of initially characterizing the dispute might mean that the affirmative would

get the first opportunity to present an answer to this question, but the dispute would focus on the words' function, not on the affirmative's choices.

The casual reader at this point might think that there is nothing new in focusing on usage in academic debate. Currently usage is a standard in many definitional disputes. The perspective that looks at meaning as use, however, is much different than current uses of "usage" as a definitional standard. If a team in a typical debate advanced the definitional standard of usage, it could probably be translated into the following: "we should look to a community's use of the term in choosing between representational definitions." For example, "the dictionary says that 'foreign' can mean 'outside this country' or 'strange,' but when people in political science use the term, they tend to mean 'outside this country' - therefore, that is what we should mean." Thus, the most common application of "usage" currently is in choosing between two or more <u>representational</u> definitions by looking at what a group of people tend to utilize more.

This is <u>not</u> the conception of usage that stems from meaning as use. Using the philosophy of language standards, we would not simply choose the most popular representational definition. Instead we would look more specifically at the <u>function</u> of the term, or the <u>effect</u> that it has when used.

In many (possibly most) instances, the differences between current practice and this new perspective would not be great. Dictionaries and other sources used by debaters to define often

consider the function of a term. For example, the practical effect of a term like "investment" in the resolution would probably be the same whether defined functionally or representationally, with both methods leading to a focus on the use of capital to gain a profit.

In the case of some terms, however, the difference in defining representationally or functionally would be profound, and perhaps decisive in the debate. An extended example might help illustrate. An affirmative team supporting the resolution "resolved that the trend toward increasing foreign investment in the United States is detrimental to this nation" might define the term "foreign" as "characteristic of, or from a country other than one's own." This is basically a representational definition: it does not say to what use the term is put, or what effect it has, it simply says that "foreign" stands for "of another country." A negative team, arguing a language-linked value objection, might argue that while there is nothing negative in the denotative definition of the term "foreign," in <u>use</u> the term can become a pejorative when it is used as a category of negative evaluation:

> ...sometimes people find the foreign to be 'alien' in the pejorative sense; that is, they regard it as bad or ugly or both (Fearnside & Holthier, 1959, p. 117).

To this the affirmative might respond "that might be how the term is used, but that is not how <u>we</u> define it," and invoke their right to define. The affirmative in this case is saying that their right to selectively define a term is more important than

the use to which the term is actually put. And it is this thesis that the conception of meaning as use most dramatically refutes. The affirmative response assumes that not only can the highly connotative term "foreign" be distilled into one brief phrase, but that the meaning of the term is somehow independent of its societal function and effect. Whether or not one agrees, factually, with the negative's argument, it must be admitted that the affirmative wraps itself in a highly questionable view of meaning. If meaning is anything, it is the role that a word plays and that role may go far beyond an affirmative's specified defintion. As Wittgenstein (BB, p. 65) says, "the meaning of a phrase for us is characterized by the use we make of it."

Seeing meaning as use potentially opens up a whole new world of argument in academic debate.[1] Linking value objections to language by considering social use potentially leads to a consideration of the ideologies embedded in various language forms (see Edelman, 1964), the ways in which language structures political thought (see Orwell, 1956), the "personas" created by the use of various language styles (see Black, 1970), the cultural embeddedness of meaning (see Whorf, 1959) and a host of other issues in the study of language and rhetoric. Given that

---

[1] Many educators in academic debate seem to believe that arguments over language are a diversion from the main concern of debate (see most recently, Dudczak, 1989). To this author it seems very odd that a communications professional would consider argument based on language to be merely "procedural" and not "substantive" (p. 12).

most collegiate debate programs are affiliated with departments of speech communication, it is surprising that issues such as these are only very recently receiving attention.

The emergence of the language-linked value objection has in a small way disturbed the consensus over the affirmative power to select and impose a simple denotative meaning. By looking at meaning as a societal effect ranging far beyond simple definition, the language-linked value objection may well force the issue and push the debate community's conception of meaning into the 20th century before that century comes to a close.

Works Cited

Black, E. (1970). The second persona. The Quarterly Journal of Speech 56(2), pp. 109-119.

Dilman, I. (1981). Studies in language and reason. New Jersey: Barnes & Noble.

Dudczak, C. A. (1989). Topicality: An equal ground standard. CEDA Yearbook, 10, pp. 12-21.

Edelman, M. J. (1964). The symbolic uses of politics. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Fearnside, W. W. & Holthier, W. B. (1959). Fallacy: The counterfeit of argument. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

Freeley, A. J. (1981). Argumentation and Debate. Belmont: Wadsworth.

Gallagher, K. T. (1981). Wittgenstein, Heraclitus, and 'the common.' Review of Metaphysics 35, pp. 45-56.

Goodnight, G. T. (1981). The reunion of argumentation and debate theory. In G. Ziegelmueller & J. Rhodes (Eds.), Dimensions of argument: Proceedings of the second summer conference on argumentation (pp. 415-432). Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association.

Hallett, G. (1967). Wittgenstein's definition of meaning as use. New York: Fordham University Press.

Herbeck, D., & Katsulas, J. (1987). The affirmative topicality burden: Any reasonable example. In D. Thomas & J. Hart (Eds.), Advanced Debate, 3rd Ed. (pp. 144-155). Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook.

Hingstman, D. B. (1983). Lessons learned: The philosophy of ordinary language and the theory of debate. In D. Zarefsky, M. Sillars, & J. Rhodes (Eds.), Argument in Transition: Proceedings of the Third Summer Conference on Argumentation (pp. 772-791). Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association.

Orwell, G. (1956). The Orwell Reader: Fiction, Essays, and reportage, with an introduction by Richard H. Rovere. 1st Ed. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Javanovich.

Parson, D., & Bart, J. (1987). On 'being reasonable:' The last refuge of soundrels. In D. Thomas & J. Hart (Eds.), Advanced Debate, 3rd Ed. (pp. 130-138). Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook.

Polkinghorn, D. (1983). Methodology for the human sciences: Systems of inquiry. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Sefler, G. F. (1974). Language and the world: A Methodological synthesis within the writings of Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Atlantica Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press.

Smith, W. (1980). Critique of the final round of the 1980 National Debate Tournament. Journal of the American Forensic Association, 17, pp. 56-58.

Snyder, A. C. (1979). Fiat power and international organizations. In D. Thomas (Ed.), Advanced Debate: Readings in Theory, Practice and Teaching (89-94). Skokie: National Textbook Company.

Unger, J. (1981). Topicality: Why not the best. Rostrum 55, 3-9.

West, F. (1975). The way of language: An introduction. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.

Whorf, B. L. (1959). Language, thought, and reality: Selected writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf. J. B. Carroll (Ed.). New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Wittgenstein, L. (1958). The blue and brown books. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wittgenstein, L. (1958). Philosophical investigations (G. E. M. Anscombe, trans.), (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wittgenstein, L. (1969). On certainty. Oxford: Blackwell.

Wittgenstein, L. (1974). Philosophical grammar (A. Kenny, trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Zimmerman, G. I., Owen, J. L., Seibert, D. R. (1986). Speech communication: A contemporary introduction. San Francisco: West.